

Aiken, South Carolina

UNION STREET AREA PLAN

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Prepared by

The City of Aiken

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

The reconstruction of the train depot as the Visitor Center and Train Museum should serve as a catalyst for the redevelopment and enhancement of the surrounding area. The Union Street Area Plan is intended to serve as a guide to both the private sector and the City in making decisions regarding needed projects.

Process

The consulting firm of The Allees Collaboration conducted a visioning process guided by a Steering Committee composed of representatives of the Aiken Downtown Development Association, the City Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department, and the City Planning Department. In October of 2010, a charrette was held to gather public input. A draft Plan was presented in January of 2011. After extensive review, another open house to solicit input, and a formal public hearing, the Planning Commission recommended the draft Plan to City Council on December 13, 2011.

Organization

In addition to an Introduction, the Plan includes chapters on Existing Conditions, Analysis, and Recommendations.

Existing Conditions

This chapter presents a map depicting existing land uses and an analysis of relevant ordinances, policies, and plans.

Analysis

This chapter presents a list of Opportunities and Challenges, a summary of Common Themes, and Observations from the consultants.

Recommendations

This chapter, the heart of the Plan, has 5 components.

- Land Use and Urban Design. In addition to future land use, this section considers zoning issues, and presents concept plans for the entire study area and Gyles Park.
- Character. Design principles, architecture, and streetscape improvements are addressed.
- Catalyst Projects. Projects that should stimulate activity are addressed including mixed-use Development, the Heritage Interpretive Walk, and infrastructure improvements.
- Implementation. Recommendations to implement the Plan include those for partnerships, funding, and continued planning and evaluation.
- Strategy Chart. The major tasks needed to implement the Plan are listed.

INTRODUCTION

History

In 1828 the South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company was established and began working on a railroad to connect Charleston to the town of Hamburg on the Savannah River. When completed in 1833, it was the longest railroad in the world at 136 miles. Named in honor of the first railroad president, Aiken was established in 1835 as a depot site along the railroad. On October 2, 1833, the first train pulled into the depot. The original grid street plan for the town was laid out by Andrew A. Dexter and Cyril O. Pascalis, engineers for the railroad. The street rights-of-way were generally 150 feet wide and typical blocks were 300 feet by 600 feet allowing for the generous parkways which contribute to Aiken's unique identity.

Two business districts were established in Aiken's early history. The first was concentrated around Laurens Street and Richland Avenue, and was considered "Uptown." The second principal business district was centered along Park Avenue, extending from York to Union Streets and was considered "Downtown".

Southern Railway built a second depot in 1899, most likely promoted by William C. Whitney, partner of Thomas Hitchcock. The depot served many "winter colonists" arriving in Aiken, many whose families still live in Aiken today. Eventually passenger rail ended in Aiken, and the depot was demolished in 1954.

Several years ago, a number of railroad and history enthusiasts had a vision of a new depot. Through a public-private partnership of the All Aboard! Committee, the City of Aiken, Aiken County, and the Aiken Corporation, the reconstructed 1899 Aiken Depot opened its doors on September 18, 2010. The depot now serves as the City of Aiken's Visitor Center and Train Museum. Two dining cars are being refurbished and will be available for public and private events. The railroad depot will once again contribute to Aiken's economy, providing a destination for both citizens and visitors to interact with Aiken's railroad history. The Visitor Center and Train Museum serves as the heart of the Union Street Area Plan and is the center of the original grid.



Purpose

Because the reconstruction of the train depot as the Visitor Center and Train Museum should serve as a catalyst for the redevelopment and enhancement of the surrounding area, a plan is needed to determine the most appropriate land uses and design for public and private improvements. The City of Aiken hired a consultant to assist with the development of a plan to serve as a policy guide for the development of the Union Street study area to include the following:

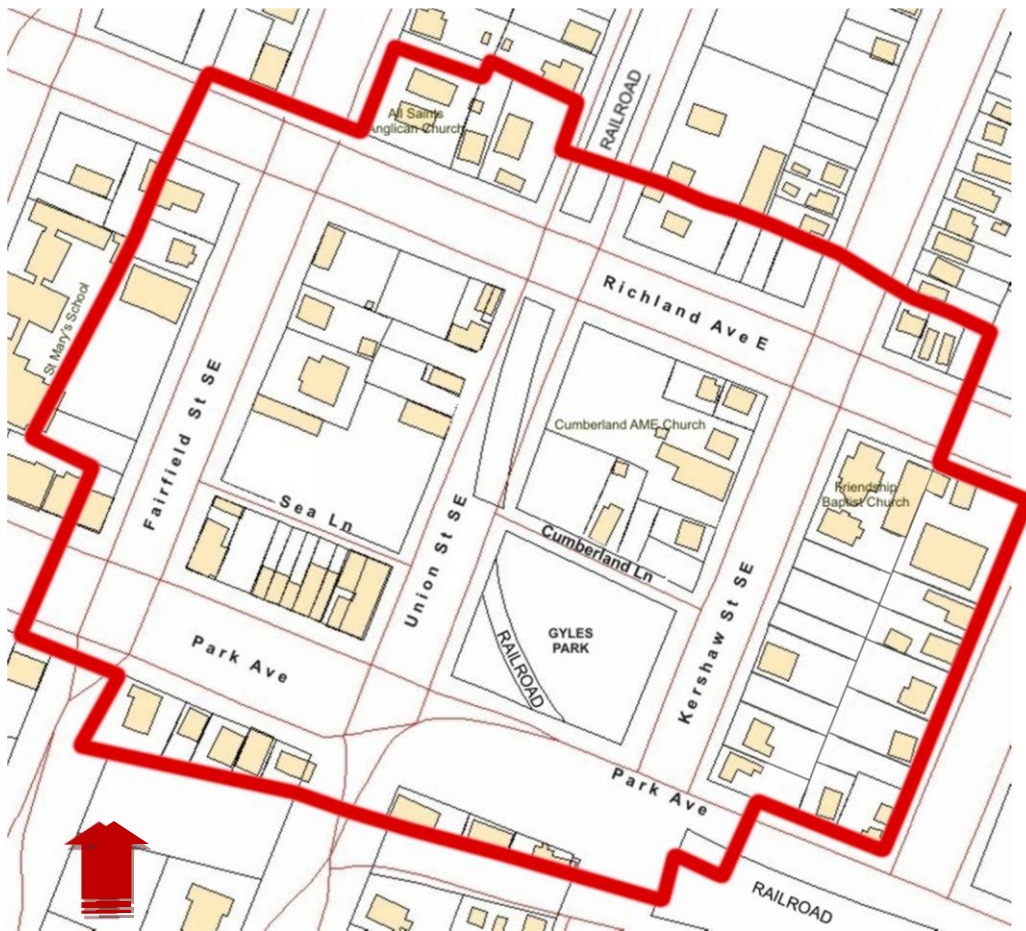
- An examination of existing conditions and potential development constraints especially land use, infrastructure, and codes and ordinances.

- A review of existing plans, including the Old Aiken Master Plan, Old Aiken Design Guidelines, expansion plans for institutions, and studies of Gyles Park.
- An evaluation of public and private development potential, including land uses and intensity, infrastructure, parking, and public facilities.
- Creation of an urban design master plan, including conceptual streetscape improvements, enhancements to Gyles Park, connections within and beyond the area, in coordination with improvements being made to the Visitor Center and Train Museum and surrounding grounds.
- An evaluation of the feasibility of using existing buildings.
- Exploration of options for creating a unique character, including architectural treatments and design, active uses and public spaces, community events, etc.
- Identification of business opportunities and catalyst development projects.
- Creation of an action plan for implementation, including specific action items, clearly defined roles for the City and partners, and a mechanism for ongoing evaluation of progress.

The plan and its recommendations were the result of a stakeholder-driven process guided by a Steering Committee.

Study Area

The study area is bounded by the railroad and Park Avenue on the south, Fairfield Street on the west, Richland Avenue on the north and Sumter Street on the east. Properties fronting both sides of the boundary streets were included except the east side of Kershaw Street. The area is relatively small, comprising approximately 31 acres and portions of eight blocks, including 10 acres of roads and sidewalks, 6½ acres of open space/parkways, 11¼ acres of developed parcels, and 3¼ acres of undeveloped or vacant property.



Visioning Process

The process for the Union Street Area Plan included public input through citizen and stakeholder involvement with the public guiding the consultants in an overall vision. Over the years, very different concepts have been proposed, and the input for this plan proved no different. While divergent viewpoints were presented by some of those who participated in the discussion, the resulting Plan attempts to represent the common themes that emerged.

Steering Committee

Prior to beginning the Plan, the City assembled a Steering Committee with representation from the Planning Department; Parks, Recreation & Tourism Department, and the Aiken Downtown Development Association (ADDA). This committee was charged with overseeing and guiding the planning process, coordinating stakeholder meetings, and general communication.



Charrette

On October 25th and 26th, 2010, a charrette was held to gather public and stakeholder input, as well as to conduct field research and background review. The consultants interviewed property and business owners in the study area, community leaders, representatives from area churches, the ADDA board, City departments, event coordinators, and cultural resource representatives. The two-day workshop ended with a public drop-in during which the consultants presented the goals of the plan and garnered additional input. Property owners were sent letters by the City to promote the meeting, and some of those owners and stakeholders who did not attend were contacted by telephone.

Draft Plan

Background research, public comments, and Steering Committee input were used to generate a draft plan that was presented at an Open House on January 18th, 2011.

Recommendations

Input from the community and Steering Committee was integrated into the Plan recommendations and a Draft document was prepared for review. The recommendations are organized into four core strategies including specific implementation tasks for each element:

Land Use and Urban Design - Land use, Master Concept Plan, and concept for Gyles Park.

Character – Architectural treatments and other character-defining elements such as design features, conceptual streetscape, active uses, and events.

Catalyst Projects – catalyst projects and development strategies for key properties.

Implementation Organization – Partnership and policy recommendations as well as funding strategies to lead the long-term development of the study area.

The Plan culminates with a Strategy Chart presenting an overall vision for each core strategy area. The Strategy Chart is phased into short, medium, and long-term implementation actions to achieve the goals of the plan.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Land Use

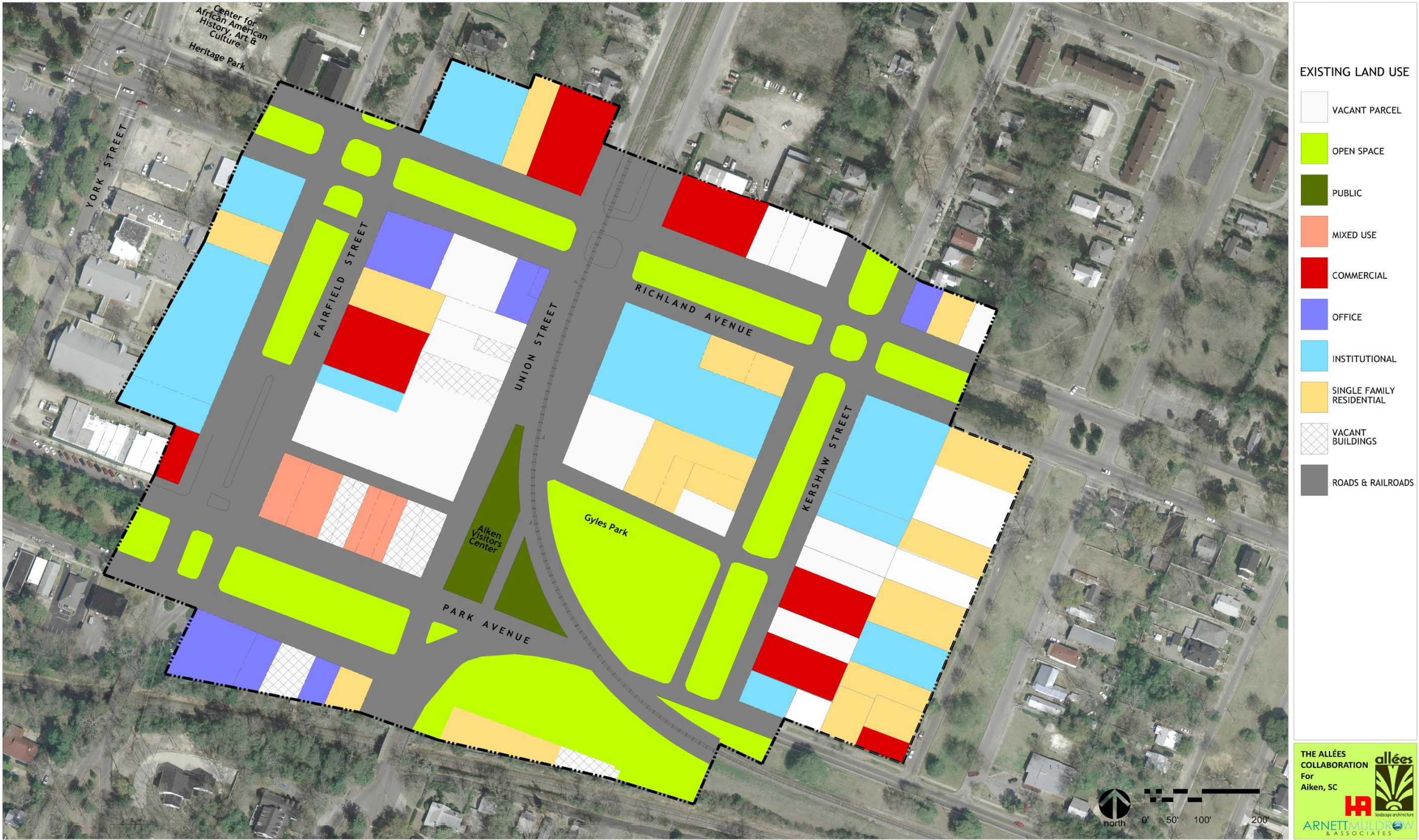
The study area is a transition zone between the current vibrant downtown centered on Laurens Street, and an older, established residential area to the east in which a number of houses have been renovated and several new residences constructed. The land uses are typical of such a transitional zone. Around the northern and eastern edges, many of the parcels which were once occupied by single-family homes are now vacant and some of the land has been acquired by area churches for expansion.

Generally speaking, each street has its own unique identity:

- The block between Fairfield and Union is primarily vacant buildings and vacant land with a few buildings occupied by businesses or mixed use (commercial with residential above).
- The block between Union and Kershaw Streets is dominated by Gyles Park and a church.
- The east side of Kershaw Street is occupied primarily by uses of institutional or community-based orientation (church, youth and community development) along with two commercial activities (funeral home & barber shop).
- Richland Avenue is a mix of land uses, varying from office and retail to institutional (church) along with three single-family homes. There are several vacant parcels formerly occupied by single-family homes.
- Many of the buildings along the south side of Park Avenue have been converted from single-family residential to office, retail, or other business uses.
- The parkways along Richland and Park Avenues as well as Kershaw Street retain the lush green character for which downtown Aiken is known.
- In the heart of the study area is Gyles Park, a passive green open space.

The map on the following page identifies existing land uses at the time of the study.

Three Churches occupy the northern edge of the study area. Each presents a unique and significant architectural character.



The City of Aiken : UNION STREET AREA PLAN

EXISTING LAND USE

The **area** was studied on several occasions to review site features including existing buildings, streets, and traffic patterns, as well as to understand how the study area was being utilized.



Three Churches occupy the northern edge of the study area. Each presents a unique and significant architectural character area.



Cumberland AME



Friendship Baptist Church



All Saints Anglican Church



Aiken's parkways are another dominant feature. The parkways along Park and Richland Avenues, and Kershaw Street are still very green with a full tree canopy, providing visual interest and buffering. A portion of the parkway along Fairfield St was long ago removed to provide additional parking.

WEST OF UNION STREET

The **east side of Fairfield Street** is occupied by a variety of building types and uses including a funeral home, a building belonging to St. Mary's, and a commercial building fronting Park Avenue. A single-family home is adjacent to the funeral home to the north.

Saint Mary's School is a major feature on the west side of Fairfield Street. The outdoor recreation area fronts along the street. Morning and afternoon traffic dominate Fairfield Street during student drop-off and pick-up hours.



Saint Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church

owns the parcel on Fairfield Street directly across from the school. There are two buildings on the property, with most of the parcel being a vacant field. Students from Saint Mary's school currently use the field for active play. St-Vincent De Paul Society operates out of one structure. The other building on the site fronts on Union Street and remains vacant.



The **south side of Richland Avenue**, between Fairfield and Union Streets, is anchored by an office and another service industry business. The large parcel between the two remains undeveloped.

The **southern end of the block** bounded by Park Avenue, Fairfield Street, Union Street and Sea Lane is occupied by attached commercial buildings. Some storefronts have been renovated, however, most have not and remain vacant. The streetscape incorporates decorative lighting, sidewalks, trees, and parking.



Park Avenue streetfront between Fairfield and Union Streets

The building anchoring the **northwest corner of Park and Union** has been vacant for some time. It was originally a hotel and most recently occupied by a package shop and restaurant.



Union Street façade at Park Ave



Rear of Park Ave storefronts

Several vacant structures are scattered along the west side of **Union Street**.



The **south side of Park Avenue** has several service businesses and offices, many in converted single-family houses.



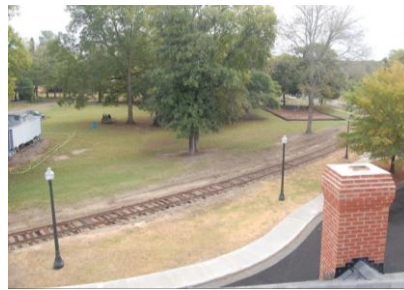
A parkway system was made possible by the wide road rights-of-way and divided travel lanes. The **Park Avenue Parkway** was part of the 2010 Sand Rivers Headwaters Green Infrastructure Project; the parkway median was reconfigured to capture and treat stormwater. The parking areas along Park Avenue, Fairfield Street and Union Street were reconstructed with pervious pavement, allowing water to pass through and discharge into the parkway, to reduce runoff and recharge groundwater.



EAST OF UNION STREET

The City of Aiken's Visitor Center and Train Museum is the major feature of the block between Union and Kershaw Streets.

An active rail spur line separating Gyles Park from The Visitor Center and Train Museum serves the kaolin processing plant just north of town and this use is not anticipated to cease any time in the near future.



Gyles Park occupies almost half of the block. It is a passive park, with a swing set, picnic tables, trees, and grassed open space.



A **single-family** house and two vacant lots front the park on the north side of Cumberland Lane. Another house faces Kershaw Street.



Across Kershaw Street from Gyles Park are several commercial/institutional buildings.



Funeral Home



Barber Shop

Old Sinclair Service Station



Two residential houses, in addition to Cumberland AME Church and Friendship Baptist Church, occupy the remainder of the block fronting Kershaw Street.

Park Avenue is the southern boundary of Gyles Park. From Union Street east, Park Avenue is no longer a divided road with the median replaced by the railroad track to the south of the roadway. On the south side of the railroad track are several residences, in various states of decline; to access the houses, driveways cross through the small remaining section of parkway.



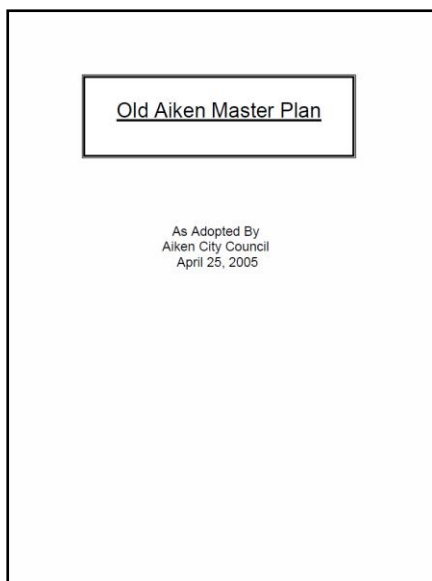
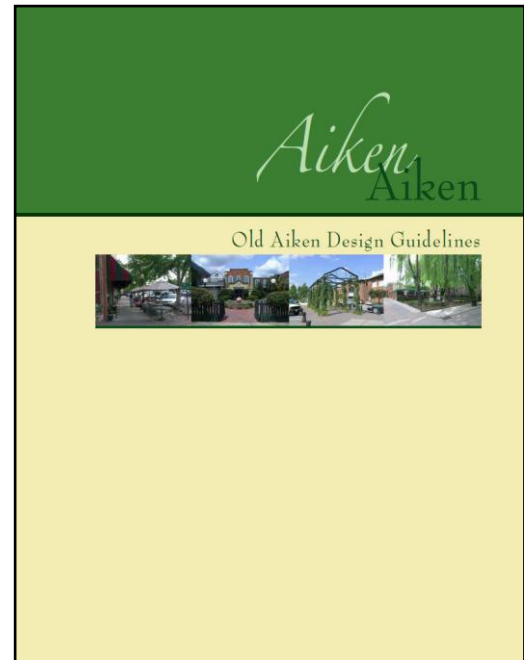
Relevant Ordinances, Policies and Plans

Aiken's existing ordinances and plans include the following documents that address development within the study area.

Old Aiken Design Guidelines

Created in 2005, the Old Aiken Design Guidelines are intended to protect the unique characteristics of Aiken's downtown and to provide a guide for renovation and new construction. The document developed design guidelines to be used as a basis for decisions on the appropriateness of project design within the Downtown Overlay District.

The Downtown Overlay District was expanded in 2007 to include other sections of Old Aiken and became known as the **Old Aiken Design Overlay District**. The Overlay District is comprised of two sub-districts: "Downtown" and "Neighborhood Area." The boundary between the two sub-districts splits the Union Street Area Plan study area down Union Street. The guidelines for Downtown Commercial-Type and Residential-Type should guide development within the entire study area.



The Old Aiken Master Plan

The Old Aiken Master Plan was created to guide the development and revitalization of Old Aiken as part of the Comprehensive Land Use and Transportation Plan. Developed for the original grid, the Plan establishes policies and action steps that were adopted by City Council and defines eight major themes. Each theme defines goals and objectives along with a schedule to assist in achieving the vision of Old Aiken. The Union Street Area Plan will address many of the goals and objectives established by the Old Aiken Master Plan.

Zoning Ordinance

City of Aiken, South Carolina



Adopted
November 22, 1999
Revised
June 2009

The City of Aiken Zoning Ordinance

The purpose of the Zoning Ordinance is to ensure that development is compatible with the existing and future needs of the community.

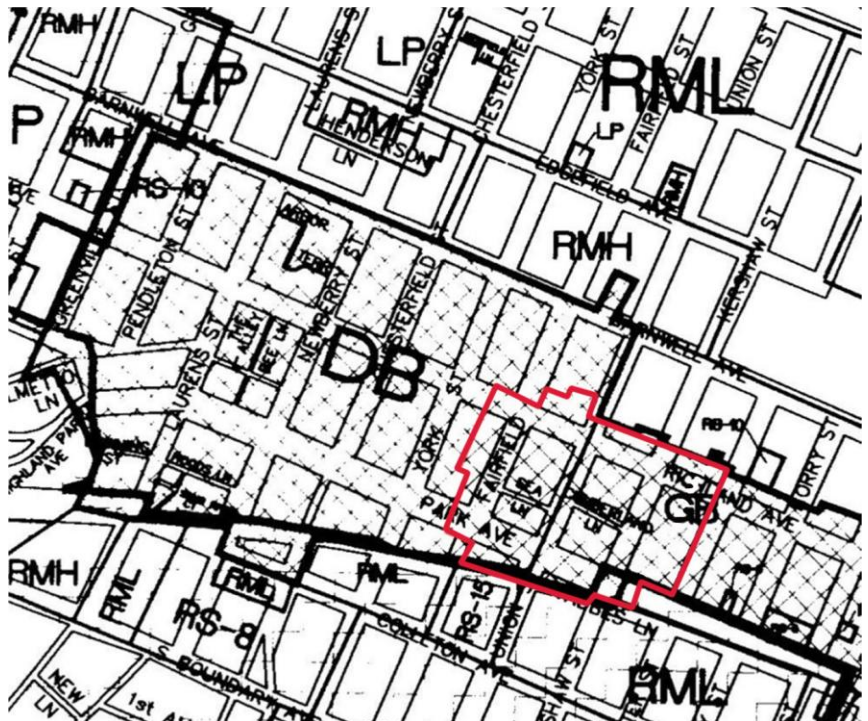
Two zoning districts exist within the study area: Downtown Business (DB) and General Business (GB). The dividing line runs down Union Street with DB to the west and GB eastward. In addition the area is in the Old Aiken Overlay District, which imposes additional design regulations on top of the base zoning regulations.

Downtown Business District (DB) provides for central commercial and civic functions in a compact area offering maximum convenience. Activities are intended to be walking-scale and the integration of uses is encouraged.

General Business District (GB) allows a broad range of commercial uses and residential uses where appropriate. Development in the GB District is more spread out and more accommodating to automobiles.

Chapter 3 – Use Regulations describes uses allowed in each zoning district. GB allows multi-family as a Special Exception, if approved by the Board of Zoning Appeals. Single-family attached or detached is allowed as a Conditional Use. DB permits both of these uses by right. Typical commercial, retail sales and service uses (restaurants, office, banks, etc.) are allowed in both districts.

Chapter 4 – Design Standards addresses minimum lot size, open space, building setbacks, height restrictions, signage, parking, landscaping, and loading zones. The Downtown Business zone is exempt from off-street parking requirements, some design standards, and some landscape requirements.



City Of Aiken Zoning Map

The Heritage Walk

An Aiken Downtown Development Association Committee recently completed a study to investigate routes to connect the Visitor Center and Train Museum with the Center for African American History, Art & Culture. The Committee recommended a walk down Richland Avenue, Fairfield Street and Sea Lane to be enhanced with landscaping and arbors similar to those elsewhere downtown.

Saint Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church

Saint Mary Catholic Church developed a long-range multi-phased master plan which identified needed renovations and expansions to the church on Park Avenue and York Street (outside the Union Street study area). St. Mary's has recently developed a new plan calling for the construction of a new sanctuary between Fairfield and Union Streets north of Sea Lane.

Plans for Gyles Park

Several groups have made recommendations for improvements to Gyles Park including a narrow-gauge rail track that could potentially be a money generator from an "amusement park" type ride activity. Other recommendations include a bandstand shelter, picnic shelter, swings and water fountain. Neither the City, Recreation Commission nor City Council has approved any plans for the park. Any improvements to Gyles Park would require approval of the Railroad.

ANALYSIS

Opportunities and Challenges

An analysis of the study area identified elements that are considered either an opportunity or a challenge. An *opportunity* is identified as a condition that presents favorable conditions for redevelopment of the area. A *challenge* is a situation or condition that could potentially limit or restrict redevelopment of the area. Additional observations from stakeholder and public involvement are detailed in the Visioning Process section.

Opportunities

- The Visitor Center and Train Museum as a destination
- The historic significance of the depot site
- The study area as the eastern gateway into downtown Aiken
- The lush green parkways as a streetscape element
- The study area as a significant location along the Heritage Walk
- Existing structures along Park Ave awaiting redevelopment
- Gyles Park as a destination and activity center
- Large undeveloped parcel between Union and Fairfield Streets
- Large undeveloped parcel on Richland Avenue
- Large undeveloped parcel on Cumberland Lane
- Many streetscape improvements already in place (decorative lighting and street trees)
- Shared parking opportunities with churches and schools (based on time periods of optimum use)
- Community based uses (churches, schools)
- Utility infrastructure in the project area is generally sufficient to support new development within the context appropriate for downtown Aiken.

Challenges

- Acquisition of small parcels to combine with larger tracts for redevelopment
- Railroad ownership of Gyles Park
- Working with churches for joint public/private projects
- Acquisition of cross easements for access and shared parking
- Development of land owned by the railroad (other than Gyles Park)
- Active rail line bisecting the study area
- The railroad track in Gyles Park restricts runoff
- The economic climate which mirrors that of the state and nation, with a lack of investment or stale market for development
- Conditions of historic buildings requiring significant maintenance or stabilization
- Absentee ownership of key properties

Common Themes

Themes that emerged during the charrette and follow-up interviews are summarized below.

- The Union Street area should complement Downtown Aiken in uses, and general design, but the area should have a unique and distinct character.
- The Old Aiken Master Plan calls for residential throughout the study area. Most interviewees thought that new residential development should be more affordable than some of the recent new residential development in the area, providing housing options for younger families, college students, empty nesters, and those in the service field (nurses, police, etc.). It is important that the product meet a niche not currently offered in downtown Aiken. High-end products in the downtown area have not been totally successful in the recent economy. It was felt that housing in the study area should support rental rates in the range of \$700 per month and owner-occupied housing in the \$150,000 to \$200,000 market.
- With limited space for new infill development, residential uses could provide for higher densities with buildings of up to 3 stories with upper-floor residential above businesses.
- The study area should also become an area of economic vitality, with an environment supportive of existing businesses as well as new development that could increase the tax base. New uses that are needed include:
 - Hotel - Restaurants - Small-scale grocer or market
 - Personal service uses - Sidewalk gallery - Civic uses/gathering/meeting place
 - Specialty shopping - Parking - Expanded church uses
- Many of the commercial buildings on Park Avenue in the study area are in a state of disrepair. While some people felt they should be saved based on their historic architectural qualities, others felt that it might be more appropriate to demolish and redevelop the properties. It was also thought that the current pattern of absentee ownership poses an ongoing challenge for development.
- The rail line serves a kaolin processing facility that will likely remain active for another 25 years. It was noted that the active rail and railroad company's ownership of a significant amount of property (including Gyles Park), may pose long-term challenges for design, activity, and use.
- Much of the study area is owned by churches. Some, like Cumberland Baptist Church, have expanded in recent years, while the others have long-term plans for growth. With little available property in the study area, redevelopment and infill opportunities may be limited. Saint Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church in particular has a long-range vision for their property between Union and Fairfield Streets. The church is currently in a capital campaign to expand their facilities. Many stakeholders suggested a partnership with Saint Mary's as plans develop.
- The study area should serve as a central public gathering place highlighted by Gyles Park and the new Visitor Center and Train Museum. The study area should have spaces for music gatherings and themed activities similar to the Saturday morning bluegrass that occurs in the parkway on Park Avenue. Potential activities included music festivals, ethnic festivals, family reunions, Saturday arts market, as well as a storytelling event that could interpret the history of Aiken to citizens, children, and

visitors. The area's uniqueness should emerge by activating the space through programming.

- It was felt that active uses could also create a unique anchor to downtown. A number of interviewees mentioned a vision of a trendy area with restaurants, outdoor dining, coffee shops, and shopping. Aiken Tech's Culinary Arts courses and the plan to utilize the rail cars as a themed dining space were mentioned. This character could also be brought out through design elements such as murals, colorful signs and banners, as well as public art.
- The planned Heritage Walk traverses the study area, linking the proposed Center for African American History, Art & Culture to the Visitor Center and Train Museum. Some suggested that this project has the potential to be larger and more significant, linking multiple heritage sites throughout Old Aiken. The connections from the study area to adjacent areas and neighborhoods were also mentioned as critically important.
- Gyles Park has seen a number of plans over the years, with a variety of visions, activities, and planned uses. Many participants felt the park and public space should be a resource for all Aikenites, rather than only visitors and that the expansion of the park into nearby property might be necessary.
- It was noted that Gyles Park could be a passive park for citizens, downtown workers, and nearby neighborhoods. Design elements mentioned included the potential for a band shell, water feature, and playground area. The Park should continue to be a resource for children in adjacent neighborhoods and its design and activity should respect the surrounding residential area.
- Maximizing the pedestrian character and walkability of the Union Street area will be a critical component of its design. There is a need for an overall improved infrastructure including streetscape and lighting, and the enhancement and protection of the parkways, trees, and open space.
- There is a perception of a lack of safety because of poorly lighted areas and deteriorating buildings.
- Opportunities for shared parking resources between businesses, public uses, and churches will be critical to the success of the plan.
- While most participants felt the architectural design should respect Aiken's existing style, others thought that the Union Street area could potentially have more contemporary architecture. It was mentioned that the City has made an effort to apply more green and sustainable landscaping in this area with pervious pavement and parkway swales. Some felt that this could extend to new architecture, with the potential for green and energy efficient buildings.

Observations

The results of review, reconnaissance, and public input led to the following general observations:

- The study area is small with a high percentage of undeveloped land. Some of this land is owned by institutions that have conceptual plans for development. Vacant or underutilized property exists in small parcels scattered throughout the study area. Any significant private investment or redevelopment will require cooperative development strategies.
- The Union Street area should be developed with a mixture of uses typical of an urban district. The different areas within the study area have distinct opportunities in terms of land use and activities. Union Street, the heart of the study area, can be a receiving area for new infill commercial development that complements commercial uses along Park Avenue. Richland Avenue presents opportunities for new infill office spaces. Portions of Richland and Kershaw Street are suitable for residential development.
- Commercial uses should complement downtown Aiken's offerings, providing affordable products and services for citizens and adjacent neighborhoods. The character of the commercial area should be dynamic and lively with active uses that make use of the sidewalk and surrounding area.
- There are opportunities along both Park Avenue, Union Street, and Richland Avenue to provide mixed-use buildings with commercial uses at the street level and residential or office uses above.
- As identified in the Old Aiken Master Plan as well as by stakeholders, the area should support new residential development that provides housing for working class, young professionals, and retirees. These units should have an appropriate density to create an active district, provide support for nearby commercial uses, and relate to open spaces.
- Development of commercial and residential uses will rely on private sector development. The City of Aiken is not a developer, but can support private investment through provision of infrastructure, incentives, and general cooperation.
- Gyles Park should serve as a passive public green space with gathering places, sitting areas, and spaces for programmed activities, shaded areas, open spaces, as well as a water feature. The park should be designed to connect more appropriately to the Visitor Center and Train Museum. Its organization of elements should maximize this central gathering space. This type of configuration is the best use of the space that is intended to be an asset for all residents of Aiken, as opposed to an attraction that serves a narrow market.
- The Union Street area is very important to Aiken's history and development particularly as it relates to the railroad. The new Visitor Center and Train Museum is being expanded with restored dining cars and a passenger platform and can be enhanced through interpretive displays and heritage events throughout the study area including Gyles Park.
- The proposed Heritage Walk is intended to link the Visitor Center and Train Museum and the proposed Center for African American History, Art & Culture. There is the

potential to expand this walk throughout downtown Aiken, creating an interpretive experience that translates Aiken's cultural heritage through displays along the path. The Heritage Walk should not only link the assets within the study area (The Visitor Center and Train Museum, parkways, churches), but also connect those cultural resources to places outside the study area such as the Schofield Middle School, Farmer's Market, etc. The Walk should be designed to encourage users to explore adjacent retail uses.

- The intersection of Park Avenue and Union Street not only represents the beginning of the Park Avenue parkway, but also a primary eastern gateway into downtown Aiken. The new Visitor Center and Train Museum and improvements to the surrounding area are a significant addition, and there is potential to enhance this gateway through improvements such as a roundabout.
- Growth in the study area, whether through institutional expansion, private-sector investment, or enhancements to Gyles Park, will create additional need for parking. While the area for new development is limited, the need for additional parking must be addressed with all proposed development. Partnerships between the City, individual property owners, and developers will be needed to ensure that new development is balanced with the need for additional parking.
- Utility infrastructure (water, sewer, gas, and electrical) in the area is generally adequate to serve future development in scale with downtown.
- Future private-sector investment may result in the need to redevelop and perhaps relocate certain uses. While this plan presents a vision for the development of the area including public-realm enhancements, it is not a requirement for any property owner to change the use of his property.
- The primary property owners include churches which serve residents of the neighborhood and Aiken in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Final Plan recommendations are organized into four core strategies including specific implementation tasks for each element

1. **Land Use and Urban Design** - Recommended land use, Master Site Concept Plan, and design for Gyles Park.
2. **Character** – Architectural treatments, as well as other character-defining elements such as design features, conceptual streetscape, active uses, and events.
3. **Catalysts Projects** – Identification of key projects and development strategies that serve as anchor projects and serve as a catalyst to spur development of the area.
4. **Implementation Organization** – Partnership and policy recommendations, as well as funding strategies to lead the long-term development of the study area.

The Plan culminates with a Strategy Chart presenting an overall vision for each core strategy area. The Strategy Chart is phased into short, medium, and long-term implementation actions to achieve the goals of the plan. The Strategy Chart should be seen as a tool to guide decision makers through a successful implementation process.

LAND USE & URBAN DESIGN

Land Use

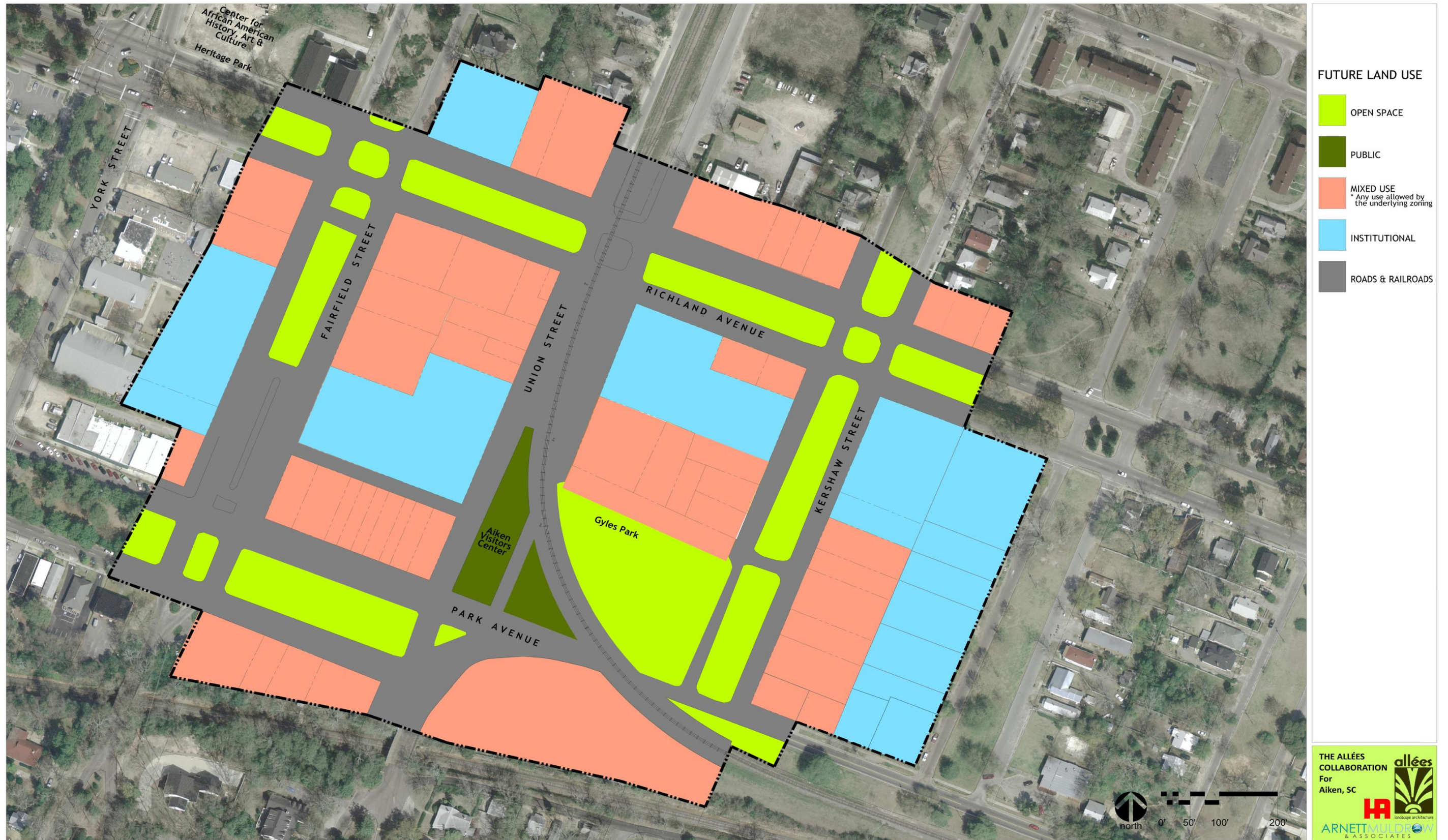
Uses for vacant buildings and undeveloped lots shown on The Future Land Use Map would allow any use permitted by the zoning district. Appropriate new uses are a mixture of multi-family residential, office, retail, and institutional. Moderately priced multi-family housing, along with affordable restaurants and businesses, were identified as prime needs for downtown Aiken.

Zoning

Union Street is the boundary between Downtown Business and General Business zoning districts. In addition to the Downtown Business zone being in an Overlay District, it has no setbacks from the property lines, minimal on-site landscaping requirements and no required on-site parking. Rezoning the GB portion of the study area to make it all DB would facilitate the goals of the plan.

Elimination of setback requirements allowing buildings to extend to the property lines is a key element in accomplishing development consistent with the downtown district. It is important that the Union Street area blend and be compatible with downtown rather than portraying a more suburban commercial character, often associated with GB zoning.

The Old Aiken Design Guidelines regulates renovations, additions and new development in certain sections of Old Aiken including the study area but those guidelines are different for property zoned DB and that zoned GB. A major recommendation of this Plan is application of the Old Aiken Design Guidelines requirements for DB to all development within the study area. This can be accomplished by extension of the (DB) Downtown Business zoning district to encompass the entire study area.



The City of Aiken : UNION STREET AREA PLAN

FUTURE LAND USE



October 2011

Master Site Concept Plan

A Master Site Concept plan was developed reflecting input for desired activities and uses. The area's opportunities and challenges were studied to develop recommendations for the optimum location for these uses. The plan represents a framework for future development and provides a glimpse of how the area could potentially look.

The elements of the Master Site Concept also help accomplish many of the goals and objectives defined in the Old Aiken Master Plan adopted in 2005. These include:

- Streetscape improvements with specific objectives to improve the appearance of the railroad right-of-way along Park Avenue
- Define the entrance corridors in Aiken's downtown
- Increase the number of residents
- Require appropriate building design
- Promote pedestrian and bicycle safety

The Master Site Concept is comprised of the following elements as labeled on the Master Site Concept Plan.

a. Southeastern Gateway and Roundabout

The Park Avenue/Union Street roundabout is suggested to enhance the sense of arrival to the Union Street area, serve as a southeastern entry to downtown, and make the awkward intersection safer. This will complement the new Visitor Center and Train Museum. Character concept sketches for "gateways" should be developed in coordination with the Department of Transportation and the Park Commission.

b. Park Avenue Building Renovations

Most of the building storefronts on Park Avenue, between Fairfield and Union Street are vacant. Occupancy of these buildings with vibrant businesses should be a prime focus. Redevelopment of these businesses could capitalize on and continue the activity generated by the Visitor Center and Train Museum.

c. Gyles Park Improvements

Improvements to Gyles Park to make it more accessible and to accommodate events will make residential development more appealing. The park improvements could be phased in over time. The initial phase should be removal of remnants of old elements that are no longer relevant. Relocation of the caboose to the Master Site Concept Plan location should occur quickly to encourage redevelopment of the park. Additional information on the redevelopment of Gyles Park can be found on page 26.

d. Gyles Park Multi-Family / Mixed Use Development

Additional residential and commercial uses in the area will help to maintain a high level of activity and liveliness; increased residential density is vital to the redevelopment of the area. Reasonably priced housing options should be provided, which will be accomplished by offering smaller units at higher densities. The housing should front on the green space presented by the parkways and Gyles Park. Additional land area for the mixed-use development can be gained by closing Cumberland Lane. The Catalyst Project section of this document provides additional information.

e. City Parking Lot

Additional parking will be needed to support the new development. A City-owned parking lot, with some spaces designated for residential, would offer convenient shared parking for the area users. This project could be an incentive for multi-family development. Parking should

be easily accessible and visible, but not dominate the streetscape. Development of this parking area will require coordination with individual landowners.

f. Union Street Mixed-Use Development

Business storefronts along Union Street should be developed to provide additional affordable services to the community. The buildings should provide mixed-use opportunities with retail space at street levels with residential or office units above. Saint Mary's Catholic Church currently owns some of this property. The City should engage Saint Mary's building committee to form a partnership. The Catalyst Project section of this document provides additional information.

g. City Parking Lot

New development will require additional parking. Off-street parking should be provided behind the buildings in the interior of the block. Like item (e) above, this will require coordination with Saint Mary's and other affected property owners, including potential land acquisition.

h. Richland Avenue Mixed-Use Development

The undeveloped parcels along Richland Avenue offer a prime opportunity for an office/retail buildings with upper-story residential. New infill development should follow the requirements of DB zoning and Old Aiken Design Guidelines, including buildings being built close to front property lines, with parking to the side or rear.

i. Saint Mary's Sanctuary

Saint Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church proposes to build a new sanctuary with meeting rooms, classrooms and offices on Fairfield Street north of Sea Lane. The concept plan presented here encourages Saint Mary's development plans to provide a street front presence along Fairfield Street, develop internal parking (g) and allow a business retail structure (f) to be developed along Union Street.

j. Renovated Existing Buildings

Two of the existing structures facing Union Street may be worthy of renovation to become part of the new mixed-use development. Additionally two occupied structures along Richland Avenue could, with façade improvements, compliment the proposed infill (h) between them.

k. Institutional Expansion

Expansion for area churches, or development of their lots, should maintain a street front presence.

l. Park Avenue Multi-Family

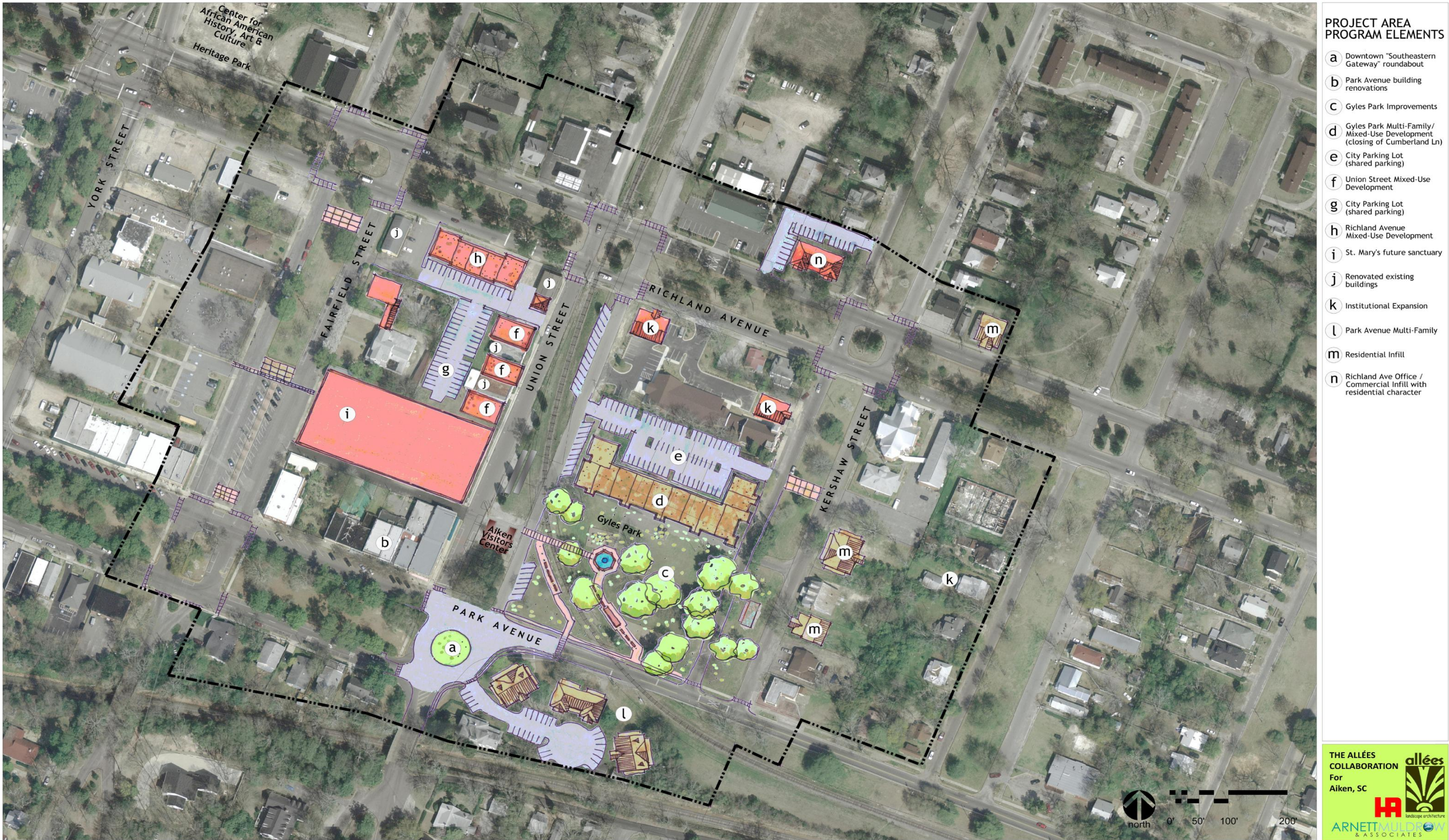
Additional housing opportunities could be provided along Park Avenue across from Gyles Park. These units would be lower in density and offer quad or duplex units. This will help accomplish Goal #2 of the Old Aiken Master Plan objective to improve the visual appearance of the railroad right-of-way along Park Avenue.

m. Residential/Mixed Use Infill

Several vacant parcels offer opportunities for residential infill. These could be duplex units to allow an increased density. These parcels also offer opportunity for mixed use infill.

n. Richland Avenue Office/Commercial Infill

The vacant parcel along Richland Avenue should be developed as office or commercial infill. As recommended by the *Old Aiken Design Guidelines*, the building character should reflect the residential character that originally occupied the site versus the use occupying the structure.



The City of Aiken : UNION STREET AREA PLAN

MASTER SITE CONCEPT

October 2011

Gyles Park

Gyles Park is a major asset of the study area and provides opportunities for informal gatherings or organized events under a shady canopy. The 1½-acre public green space should continue to provide a place for events, exercise and meeting neighbors. The park is a crucial element in attracting potential residents and will become a place for activity serving the immediate neighborhood and all of downtown.



The park should be preserved for public space. Gyles Park is relatively small, and in order to become a more significant gathering space, the entire park should be dedicated to passive recreation. This also reserves the adjacent lands for a higher development activity. Residential uses will enhance the study area, generating users and activity, providing a sense of security. The Visitor Center and Train Museum has already become an asset, and it can be best enhanced through more passive interpretive activities.

Pedestrian connectivity is critical in promoting the use of the park. Gyles Park is immediately east of the Visitor Center and Train Museum with an active rail line separating them. The park should be reconfigured to connect more appropriately to the Visitor Center and Train Museum. Decorative crosswalks are needed to provide safe pedestrian connections to Gyles Park which should be provided across the rail line as well as across Kershaw Street and Park Avenue.

Park improvements should be simple and provide for events and passive activities. A conceptual park plan was developed focusing on organizing elements to maximize the central gathering space. The plan for Gyles Park includes the following elements as labeled on the plan:

- a. A Walkway Promenade is proposed parallel to the railroad track connecting Park Avenue pedestrians to the City of Aiken's Visitor Center and Train Museum. Bench swings along the Promenade offer pleasant resting places for more passive use.
- b. A significant Focal Point, such as a water feature will provide visual interest and offer pleasing cooling and sound effects. The water feature should be reminiscent of the old horse watering trough that was originally a major feature of the park and should be located in the original location.
- c. The Passenger Platform will be reconstructed parallel to the rail track on the east side. Glider benches or bench swings should be incorporated to provide enjoyable sitting spots. The loading platform walkway should extend down to Park Ave and provide a safe crosswalk connector to the southern residential area.
- d. An Event Staging Area is designated in the central parkway of Kershaw Street. The street can be closed during special events to allow the gathering space to expand into the street and the parkway. The street pavement will provide a solid base for events requiring more durable surfacing.
- e. The relocated Caboose becomes visible from Park Ave, providing interest and character reinforcing the historic rail theme.

- f. An at-grade Pedestrian Connection provides safe access between the Park and the Visitors Center and Train Museum.
- g. The Pedestrian Extension of the Passenger Platform provides a safe connection to Park Avenue.
- h. The relocated Visitors Center and Train Museum Parking Area accommodates the Pedestrian Extension to Park Ave.

Any improvements to Gyles Park will require the cooperation of the Railroad, including potentially negotiating the City's acquisition of the property.



GYLES PARK PROGRAM ELEMENTS

- a**
WALKWAY PROMENADE
Connection between Gyles Park and Park Avenue, swings along the Promenade offer pleasant places for people watching
- b**
FOCAL POINT
Water feature reminiscent of historic horse trough, on axis with pedestrian connection to the Visitors Center Train Museum
- c**
PASSENGER PLATFORM
Reconstructed passenger platform becomes a pleasant covered sitting area with glider benches or swings
- d**
EVENT STAGING AREA
Staging area occupies the Kershaw Street Parkway, structure should be temporary
- e**
RAILROAD CABOOSE
Relocated caboose becomes a prominent feature from Park Avenue, providing additional interest along the Promenade
- f**
PEDESTRIAN CONNECTOR
On grade walkway connection between Gyles Park and Aiken Visitors Center
- g**
PEDESTRIAN EXTENSION
Extend pedestrian connection from the Platform to Park Avenue, provide safe crosswalks to residential zone south of Park Avenue
- h**
VISITORS CENTER PARKING
Relocate parking area to allow for pedestrian connection to Park Avenue



The City of Aiken : UNION STREET AREA PLAN

GYLES PARK SITE CONCEPT

October 2011

CHARACTER

This section presents recommendations for architectural treatments, design elements, active uses, and public spaces that will create the overall identity and character of the Union Street Area as a distinct place.

Design Principles

While the City can help to guide the study area's growth through public improvements and building strategic partnerships, the development will depend on private investment. With much of the property owned by churches, the personality of the area will also be defined by visions and expansion efforts of these institutions.

The recommendations here should be seen as a policy guide for the City and its partners to use in working together to meet the Plan's vision. Therefore, it is important to note that the images, urban design, and architectural renderings are not meant to show how the individual properties and buildings must be built, but are presented as examples of how the area could develop in a manner that meets the goals of the Plan.

Architectural details presented on the following pages are secondary to the design principles on which they are based. Based on Aiken's current policies and guidelines, as well as the stakeholder input that has driven the Plan's vision, the following design principles should be key considerations with any new development.

Historic Urban Fabric and Architecture

Downtown Aiken's uniqueness is defined by the historic building fabric and character. In developing the Union Street Area, every effort should be made to retain this historic character. An important recommendation of this document is to apply the requirements of the Design Review Process and the Old Aiken Design Guidelines to development within the Union Street study area. This will encourage reinforcement of Aiken's historic downtown character, while also permitting contemporary interpretations that respect the scale and character of traditional downtown Aiken. Ultimately, it is the Old Aiken Design Guidelines in conjunction with the recommendations of this Plan that will be used for review and approval of new construction, additions, or demolition within the study area.

Scale

Development should respect the scale of historic Aiken's downtown including building massing, arrangement on the site, and building height. While the Old Aiken Design Guidelines suggest that massing of buildings should be of similar complexity with comparable structure types in the area, the Union Street Area has no definitive scale or pattern set. The DB district currently permits buildings up to 50' tall. With the vast majority of buildings in downtown Aiken being two stories, a 50'-tall building in the Union Street Area would likely be inappropriate. Still, a number of downtown historic buildings as well as certain new construction are three stories. Development patterns for historic downtowns like Aiken would have buildings of larger scale on key corners, or as institutional or civic uses such as the old Hotel Aiken (anchor lot) as well as the Aiken County Judicial Center, and area churches (community uses). As the eastern gateway into downtown Aiken, the Union Street Area has the potential to

accommodate buildings of slightly larger scale, but it is critically important that scale respect both downtown, as well as the adjacent residential neighborhood. Therefore, the scale of new buildings should be limited to two or three stories, with the majority of buildings being two stories.

Orientation

Buildings in the Union Street area should emphasize a street-front presence similar to downtown. Alignment of building façades along the sidewalk edge creates a wall of buildings typical of historic downtowns. Similarly, building entrances should be oriented towards the street, reinforcing the pedestrian character of the study area and downtown.

Architectural Detailing

While the Old Aiken Design Guidelines discourage new construction that copies historic architectural styles, it stresses the importance that it represents the historic architectural treatments currently found in downtown. The Union Street area therefore could receive more contemporary treatments, as long as they share scale, proportion, materials, and general form of Aiken's historic downtown. It is also important that any building constructed higher than two stories provide a softer scale through the application of design detailing that is more in character with two-story commercial and residential architecture.

Building façades should be articulated or broken up through the use of design elements such as windows, doors, cornices, eaves, rooflines, decorative details, recessed areas, balconies, or other features. The repetition of elements should create a consistent rhythm.

The relationship of the building elements to one another lends to the overall building character. The size and scale of detail elements should be in proportion to one another as well as in proportion to the overall structure (height and width). Elements should not be minimized nor should they be overstated. Not only should the building elements respect each other in the individual building, they should respect the character of similar buildings in downtown.

Rooflines should never be the dominant building feature. This creates a top-heavy structure that would be out of character with downtown Aiken.

Pedestrian Friendly

Much like Aiken's historic downtown, the Union Street area should be developed as a pedestrian-oriented area rather than a more suburban design intended to accommodate the automobile. Buildings should encourage the use of the sidewalks, while public spaces should be designed with pedestrian amenities, adequate light and shading, pedestrian-oriented signage, etc. Similarly, efforts should be made to enhance the area's pedestrian connections to adjacent neighborhoods, uses, and downtown.

Parking

Parking within the Union Street area should be limited to on-street spaces and interior or side yard lots with no on-site parking in front of the buildings. On-site parking in front of buildings is more suburban in nature, does not contribute to pedestrian character, and interrupts the line of storefronts which help define the public space. Even with

limited space in the Union Street area, there is still the real potential to create adequate interior parking lots to serve new and existing uses.

The mixture and diversity of uses and activities in the study area present perfect opportunities for shared parking.

Consistent with the "green infrastructure" project recently completed in downtown, parking and hardscape surfaces should minimize the environmental impact of the additional development through the use of permeable or porous surfaces.

Activity

Any new development or design feature should be planned in a manner to maximize the activity within the Union Street area, including pedestrian amenities, enhanced public spaces, programmed events, active private sector uses that utilize the sidewalks, and even design features such as residential uses that front on Gyles Park.

Architectural Treatment

The character image sheets that follow describe and give examples of design recommendations for architectural treatment within the Union Street Area Plan study area.

UNION STREET MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT

The appearance of several smaller buildings can be improved through the use of changes in height, roof forms, building materials, color, and change in façade style.



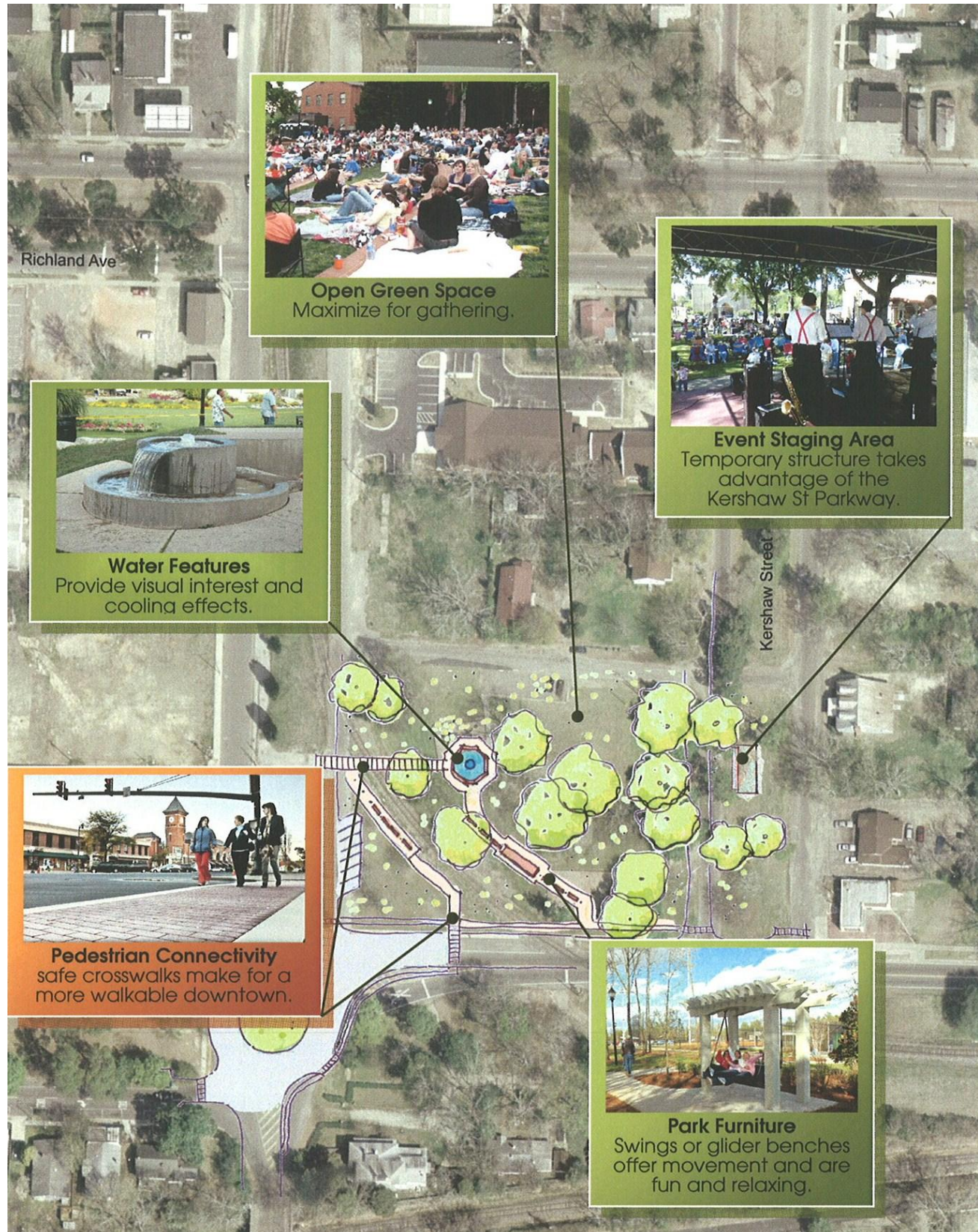


RICHLAND AVENUE MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT



UNION STREET AREA MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT

Mixed-Use Development should differentiate between units through change in materials, color, height, roof forms, detailing, and setback.



GYLES PARK

Development should reinforce a central open space accommodating various activities.

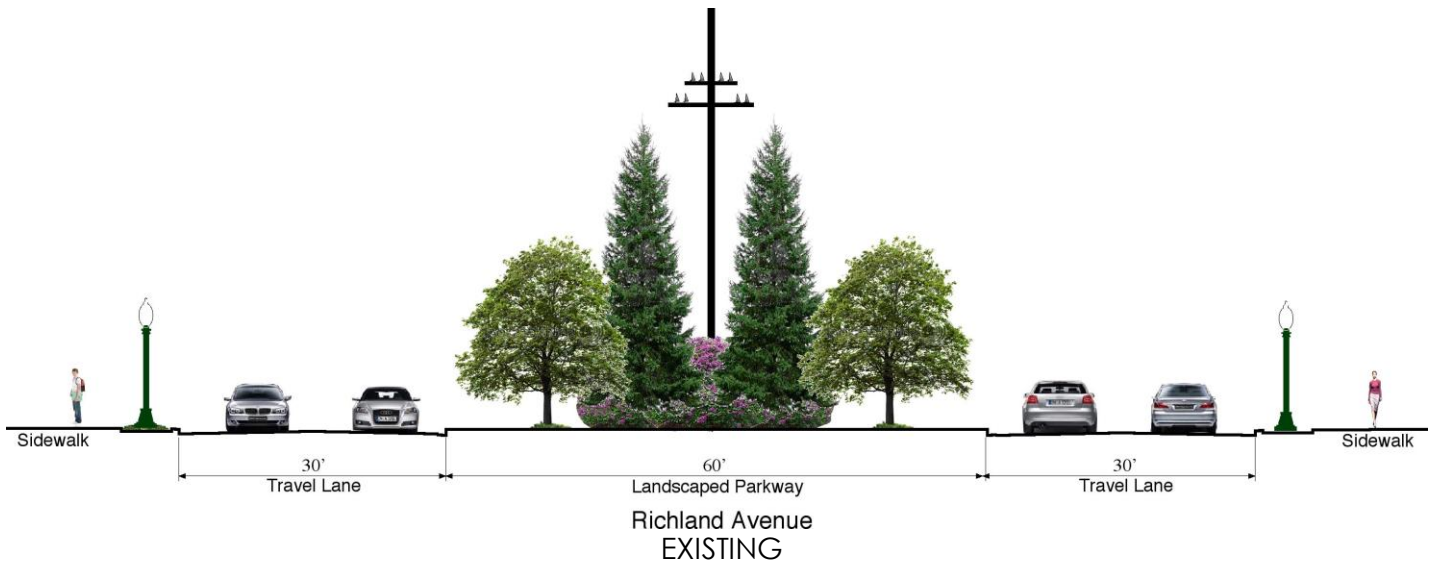
Conceptual Streetscape

The character of Aiken's streetscape has essentially been established. Most streetscapes in the study area have decorative streetlights, shaded sidewalks, mature street trees, buildings built to the street, and brick or stucco façades. Any new development infill should build upon the existing character.



Suggested streetscape improvements include additional decorative lighting, decorative pedestrian crosswalks, curbs and sidewalks where missing, additional street furniture and replacement of overhead utilities with underground utilities.

RICHLAND AVENUE – Richland Ave has decorative acorn lighting and sidewalks down both sides of the street with overhead utilities down the landscaped central parkway.

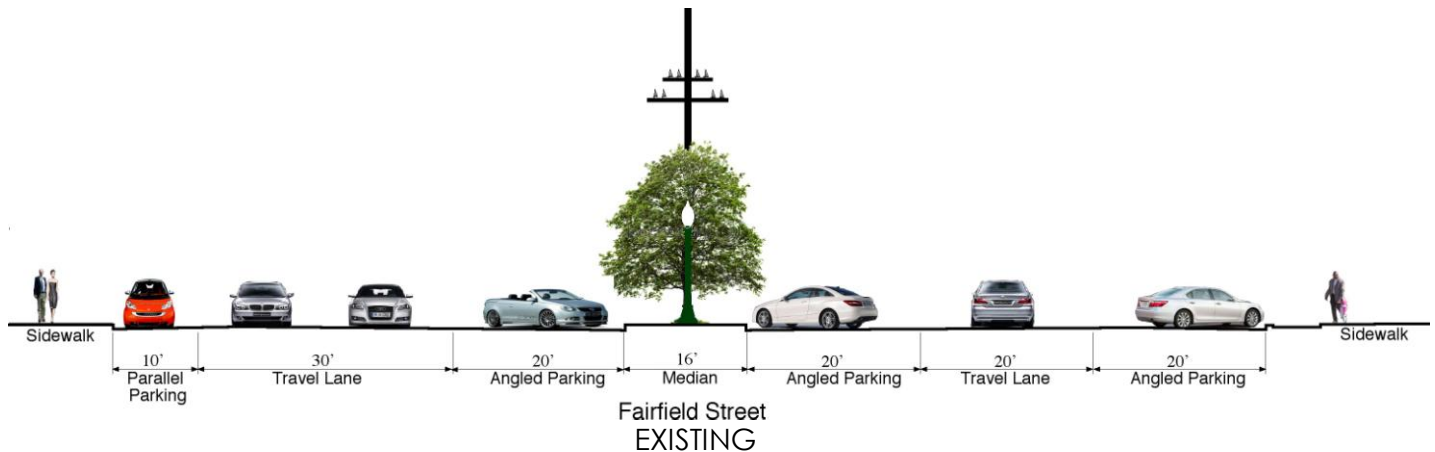


Recommended Streetscape Improvements

- Conduct necessary general maintenance of public spaces.
- Construct new development with building edges near the sidewalks to create a street front presence and pedestrian activity zones.
- Install colorful district banners to create a more aesthetically pleasing environment, slow down traffic and identify the area as a gateway into downtown.
- Remove overhead utilities.
- Install trees along sidewalks.
- Install site furniture (benches and trash & recycling receptacles).



FAIRFIELD STREET – Almost half of the central parkway has been taken for surface parking. The central median between diagonal parking stalls is planted with small trees between which are paved areas, some with acorn-style light fixtures. Overhead utilities occupy the central median. Sidewalks extend partially down the street. Parking is along both sides of each travel lane.



Recommended Streetscape Improvements

- Install decorative cut-through areas.
- Extend sidewalk along the east side (St. Vincent's).
- Repair asphalt paving and curb.
- Install additional pedestrian lighting down the sidewalks.
- Construct new development with building edges near the sidewalks to create a street-front presence.
- Install colorful district banners.
- Remove overhead utilities.
- Install trees along sidewalks
- Replace Bradford pear trees with suitable street trees.
- Install site furniture (benches and trash & recycling receptacles).



PARK AVENUE – Parking exists along both sides of the central parkway as well as along the opposite edge of travel lanes. Both sides of the street have mature trees, acorn lights and sidewalks. As part of a 2010 program to better control stormwater runoff, many parking areas in the study area were reworked using strips of pervious pavement.

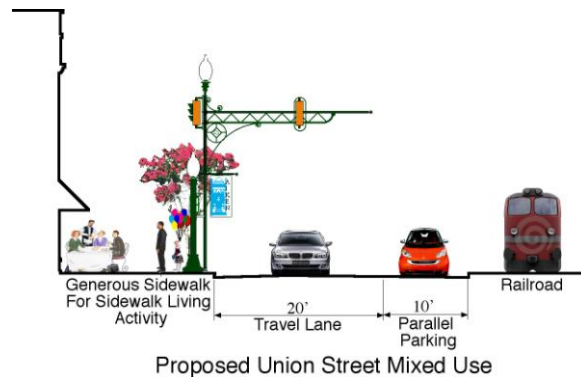
Recommended Streetscape Improvements

- Add striping to parking areas.
- Define crosswalks with pavers or striping.
- Replace any declining/missing street or parkway trees.

UNION STREET

Recommended Streetscape Improvements

- Continue sidewalk along Richland Ave at the railroad track.
- Landscape the area along the railroad parallel with Union Street.
- Repair asphalt pavement.
- Stripe parking spaces.
- Install sidewalk and lighting along the east side of the road.
- Define crosswalks with pavers or striping.
- Construct new mixed-use development with building edges near the sidewalks to create zones for pedestrian activity and social gathering.
- Install safe pedestrian connections to Gyles Park.
- Install colorful district banners.
- Remove overhead utilities.
- Install trees along sidewalks.
- Install site furniture (benches and trash & recycling receptacles).



KERSHAW STREET - The street is not curbed and should remain this way to be compatible with the residential area to the east and the current trend to capture stormwater in the parkways. The street does not have lighting or sidewalks.

Recommended Streetscape Improvements

- Install decorative lights on both sides of the street.
- Construct sidewalks down both sides of the street.
- Define crosswalks with pavers or striping.

Activity

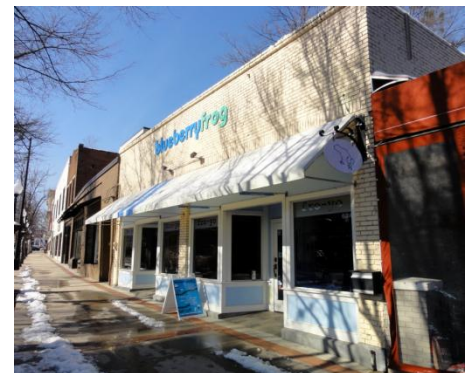
Stakeholder input has consistently maintained that the Union Street study area should be an active environment that is unique. The area should provide spaces for activities not currently found in Aiken and be attractive to a wide spectrum of users, specifically a younger demographic of professionals, and families. This environment should be dynamic and lively, providing entertainment options, inexpensive residential, and uses that enliven the area. By the same token, it is important that the urban framework and architectural design remain consistent with the “Aiken style” found in the historic downtown.

Not only can the area become a vibrant and active place, but it can also become a component of Aiken’s plan for economic and community growth. Many communities are employing economic development strategies that create an environment that affords a quality of life desired by entrepreneurs and young professionals, fostering innovation and home-grown investment. A redeveloped Union Street area can become a place that is lively, well-connected, and has the appropriate activities that allow people to live, work, and be entertained.

Design Details

Aiken’s downtown is defined by a grid of streets and parkways, as well as its historic architecture. This character carries over into the Union Street area including the historically accurate reconstructed depot that lies at its heart. While new architecture should reflect the character of the historic community, certain design details can add color and activity to the study area creating an identity that establishes it as a distinct area.

A banner system can infuse color and create a more inviting district. Small, colorful banners affixed to decorative light poles contribute to the pedestrian character and can delineate the area as a unique district, advertise upcoming activities, or share historic information. Similarly, encouraging private businesses to create colorful and creative signs and window displays can add to the area’s environment.



Active Uses

Ultimately, it will be the uses themselves that create a vibrant Union Street area. Aiken should encourage restaurants to have outdoor dining and shops that make use of the sidewalks with outdoor advertising and display of merchandise.



Active spaces can be created through programmed events. With the new Visitor Center and Train Museum and future redevelopment of Gyles Park, Aiken will have a revitalized central park that can host passive activities as well as events. Any event located at the park should be unique compared to those that currently occur on Newberry Street Festival Center. In fact, smaller regular events can have a significant impact, bringing steady activity to the area for the good of businesses and use of residents. An example of this would be impromptu jam sessions. Similar activities could include food and arts focused events.



Public

It is not the intent that Union Street become an arts district, but similar to other areas in downtown Aiken where art has been installed, public art can add creativity and excitement to this area. In the case of the Union Street study area, there is the opportunity to use public art as a way to interpret Aiken's unique history, particularly as it relates to the railroad. Other communities have used murals and artistic markers to reveal their past while also creating enjoyment.



Local artists' works can be subtly introduced into a historic district through banners, graphics affixed to street furniture, and even decorative bricks.

Signage

Colorful and branded wayfinding can direct residents and visitors. A comprehensive system could incorporate Aiken's logo and be expanded throughout the downtown and community. Different districts can be identified through different colors and banner treatments.



Comprehensive Signage System for Gaffney, SC

CATALYST PROJECTS

This section presents key catalyst projects to the Union Street Area development as identified by stakeholders. The projects may require strong partnerships and complex arrangements, and will rely on willing property owners and a favorable market. The projects may be part of more detailed strategies mentioned previously. This section is not meant to present project priorities. Some projects will be accomplished in the short term, while others will require long-term efforts and significant investments. All recommendations are prioritized in the strategy chart included at the end of this Plan.

These projects should be considered catalysts that will define the character and active use of the study area, generate continued economic activity and investment, and serve as anchor developments.

Gyles Park Multi-Family/Mixed Use Development

The Union Street area could incorporate affordable and unique residential opportunities mixed with retail and office uses. With a limited amount of property available for infill development, the primary opportunity to provide any significant development is the property just north of Gyles Park between Union and Kershaw Streets. The potential to assemble property there will provide for an appropriate mixed-use development.

The development would serve as the northern boundary of Gyles Park, framing space including the park, the Visitor Center and Train Museum, and St. Mary's proposed sanctuary on Union Street.



Key considerations for this mixed use development include the following:

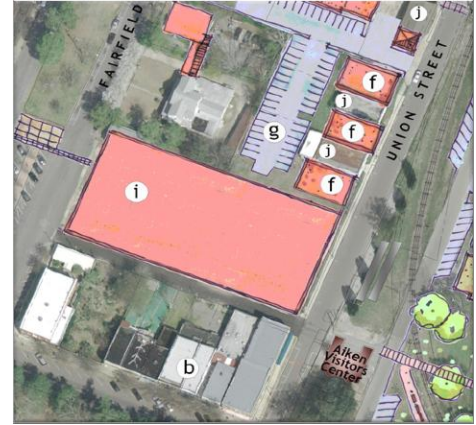
- With many conflicting visions for the use of the vacant parcels just north of Gyles Park, there must be a balance between the desire for an expanded public park and the potential to encourage private investment that creates activity and expands the City's tax base. While both visions are valid, a significant public space can be accomplished through improvements to Gyles Park as identified in this Plan, eventually creating an active park that is enhanced by private-sector development.
- A developer's return on investment will drive the market feasibility of the project. In order to achieve affordability, the development would require a certain density. In order to determine the feasibility, the Aiken Corporation should sponsor a market study to determine the type of product that would be feasible.
- The design of the development should face the green space presented by the parkways and Gyles Park. Porches and decks facing on public spaces can add activity while also creating a feeling of safety. Additional land area can be captured by closing Cumberland Lane.
- The Aiken Corporation should create a poster-sized foldable brochure to market the Plan and its vision to area developers. The brochure should be a graphic-intensive executive summary of the Plan, and detail the type of development desired.



- The City does not own the subject property, so partnerships with existing property owners and developers must be created to promote the vision and market the property for redevelopment. The Aiken Corporation can create requests for development proposals for the key catalyst projects. A request for development proposal should detail specific criteria for development (use, building type, design) and should be distributed to developers in the CSRA and beyond.
- In order to get the appropriate development, the City may need to assist the developers with needed public improvements, such as public parking, as incentives to bring in private investment.

Union Street Mixed-Use Development

The second catalyst project is Union Street Mixed Use Development. There is a limited amount of space in the Union Street area for any significant infill development. A small group of existing buildings fronting Park Avenue has redevelopment potential for commercial and mixed-use. Union Street itself exists as the primary corridor and heart of the area, and can become the "Main Street" for the district.



The development should be an active space that ties in to the Visitor Center and Train Museum, as well as Gyles Park and the mixed-use development north of Gyles Park. The mixed-use development should have a dynamic character with uses that are unique in downtown Aiken. Businesses, activities, and amenities geared to young families and professionals should bring activity to the sidewalks.

Key considerations for this mixed-use development include:

- Saint Mary's currently owns the vacant property in this area and has a vision for its development. The church is currently preparing plans for a new sanctuary on the property between Sea Lane, Union and Fairfield Streets.

It is critical that Saint Mary's be engaged early on to discuss the Plan's vision in context with the church's vision. There should be discussion with the church to determine if the Church's plan can accommodate mixed-use development fronting on Union Street north of the proposed sanctuary.

- The City's primary opportunity to partner with Saint Mary's would be through the development of off-street parking. As identified in the Master Site Concept Plan, there is a real opportunity to provide substantial parking mid-block behind development fronting on both Union and Fairfield. The potential to bring in mixed-use development to the property would provide Saint Mary's with additional capital.
- If Saint Mary's agrees to pursue a shared vision, Aiken Corporation could then begin preliminary discussions with other property owners within the block to present the vision and to discuss the potential for the shared parking resource identified in the Plan. Currently, parking in the Union Street study area is limited and existing businesses have to use on-street spaces for employees and customers.
- With a shared vision, the public-private partners can then create requests for development proposals for the project which would detail specific criteria for development (use, building type, design) and be distributed to developers in the CSRA and beyond. The Aiken Corporation could potentially facilitate the solicitation of outside development.

- Consideration should be given to the preservation of the two existing vacant historic buildings that are identified in the Master Site Concept Plan and architectural renderings. These buildings appear to be in salvageable condition, and set the scale and character for future development.

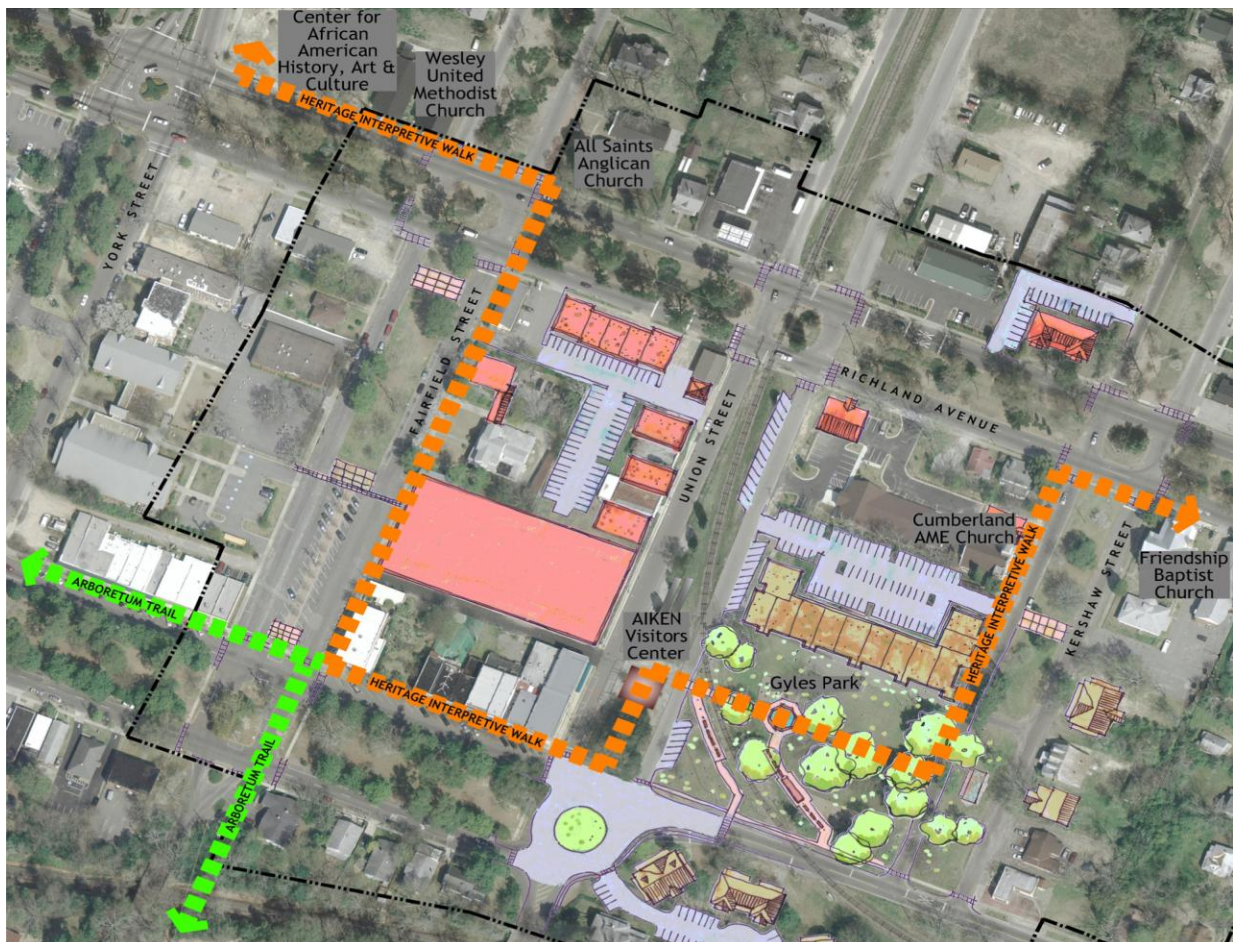


- The development should also be two-story structures with the potential for one and three-story façades in certain places. The character of the buildings should meet the requirements of the Old Aiken Design Guidelines and reflect the historic commercial style and character in downtown Aiken.
- The project should be mixed-use, with retail on the street level and residential or office units on the upper floors. The retail uses at the street level should include outdoor dining and activities that make use of the sidewalk while serving the residents who live within the study area and beyond.

Downtown Heritage Interpretive Walk

An Aiken Downtown Development Association Committee proposed plans for development of a Heritage Walk. The Heritage Walk has the potential to be a tremendous asset to Aiken and its downtown. Originally envisioned to connect the Visitor Center and Train Museum to the proposed Center for African American History, Art & Culture, the Heritage Walk concept should be expanded to connect the historic and cultural assets throughout downtown. The Walk should provide access to the following sites in and near the Study Area:

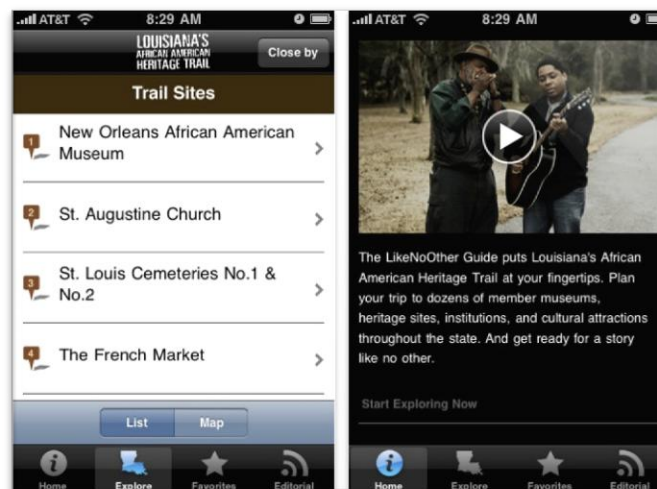
- Center for African-American History, Art, and Culture
- Wesley United Methodist Church
- All Saints Anglican Church
- Arboretum Trail
- Park Avenue businesses
- The Visitor Center and Train Museum
- Rail Cars & future enhancements
- Gyles Park
- Cumberland AME Church
- Friendship Baptist Church
- Smith-Hazel Recreation Center
- Schofield Middle School and Campus



After connecting through the Union Street Area, the walk should link with other cultural resources in and near downtown such as the Schofield Middle School and the Farmers' Market. The route of the Heritage Walk can be delineated through special signage, interpretive boards, and perhaps even special pavement treatments. The Walk can be supplemented by a printed brochure, as well as a mobile application for users' cell phones.



Aiken also has an opportunity to utilize new technologies to enhance the interpretive experience of the Heritage Walk. Downloadable mp3 or podcast narratives have been successfully used in other communities and are inexpensive to produce. Other methods include dynamic cell phone applications. For example, the Louisiana Office of State Tourism has developed an application for Louisiana's African American Heritage Trail. The app includes a map of all historic locations, along with narratives, photographs, and travel information. A similar but simpler application could be developed for Aiken and its Heritage Walk.



Source: Louisiana Office of State Tourism

Infrastructure

In addition to the projects mentioned above, the Plan calls for a number of infrastructure improvements. These will set the character for the public spaces while also serving to support and incentivize new private investment.

These include:

- General streetscape improvements throughout the study area, including linkages to adjacent areas.
- Public parking that supports the two catalyst projects mentioned above.
- The roundabout on Park Avenue that will serve as the gateway into downtown and the Union Street study area.
- Gyles Park improvements as identified previously in this document.

IMPLEMENTATION

This plan sets a long-term vision for a redeveloped and vibrant Union Street area. Even though it covers a small geographic area, there are many stakeholders who should support the Plan and be responsible for its implementation. As previously mentioned, much of the development and future character of the area will rely on the private sector, willing property owners, churches, and other organizations. It is anticipated that a number of individuals and agencies will need to play a role, including, but not limited to:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| - City of Aiken | - Aiken Downtown Development Association |
| - Aiken Parks & Recreation & Tourism | - Friends of Aiken Railroad Depot |
| - Area Churches | - Private Property Owners |
| - Private Developers | - Norfolk Southern Railroad |
| - Aiken Corporation | |

The City will lead implementation, particularly as it relates to public improvements. However, many of the private-sector projects detailed in this Plan are complex, and will require a shared vision and strong public/private partnerships. While the City will help facilitate the Plan's implementation, it will not be responsible for the actual development.

Partnership Recommendations:

- The initial step in implementation will be for City Council to adopt the Plan as a policy guide for the development of the study area. Adoption would not require the area to develop exactly as identified in the Master Site Concept Plan. Rather, the Plan suggests a set of tasks for Aiken and its partners in order to achieve the general Plan vision.
- As identified above, a number of individuals and agencies will play roles in the implementation of the Plan. While each general area may have multiple partners, it is anticipated that each will be led by a particular agency.
 - **Public improvements.** The Plan outlines specific public sector improvements to streetscape, Gyles Park, and parking which will be the responsibility of the City.
 - **Business recruitment.** Small business recruitment efforts should be the responsibility of The Aiken Corporation.
 - **Event & Tourism development.** The Visitor Center and Train Museum and Gyles Park represent the heart of the Union Street study area. Both of these destinations will increase local and visitor activity. Programming of the Park and The Visitor Center and Train Museum should be led by the City of Aiken Parks, Recreation, & Tourism Department.
- Upon adoption of the plan by City Council, the City should present the Plan recommendations to its implementation partners. The purpose of these meetings will be to share the goals of the Plan, obtain buy-in of the general concept, and assign specific tasks from the Strategy Chart to individuals and organizations.
- To guide the Plan's progress, the City should form an Implementation Team comprised of the Steering Committee along with additional key stakeholders. The committee should be kept small, meeting on a regular basis to discuss plan progress and assign responsibilities. The Strategy Chart should be used as the long-range work plan.

- A strategy for promoting economic development opportunities should be developed. A plan brochure will assist in targeting developers for key projects. It should be supplemented by regular marketing of available properties, as well as the recruitment of small, active businesses and new residents. Promotion of available properties can be accomplished by: coordinating with area realtors, listing available properties on the ADDA website, and posting on web-based and social media outlets.

Funding Recommendations:

- Pursue various methods for financing infrastructure and public improvements.

Potential sources include:

- Accommodations taxes used for tourism-related expenses such as promotion of events, or tourism based improvements.
- Hospitality taxes to help fund tourism-related projects.
- The Parks and Recreation Development Fund (PARD) is administered by the State for new recreation facilities and enhancements to existing facilities.
- Community Development Block Grants (CBDG) for revitalization projects and other community development activities.
- Foundations and private funding sources such as the Central Savannah River Area Community Foundation for certain community projects.
- Capital project sales taxes for projects approved by the voters.
- National Register District designation can provide tax credits to qualifying projects and properties.
- Evaluate the potential for a tax increment financing (TIF) district. A successful TIF district depends on private investment, and should be considered when new private-sector development is being planned in downtown or the study area.
- Consider including public improvements from the Plan in the Capital Improvements Program.

Continued Planning & Evaluation Recommendations:

- A market analysis was conducted as part of the downtown charrette completed in Aiken in 2004. ADDA should complete an updated market assessment to determine opportunities for new businesses, tying its findings to a strategy for small-business recruitment.
- A residential development feasibility and market study should be conducted to determine what the market would bear in terms of product, type, and price. The findings of this study can supplement any request for development proposal soliciting developers.
- The Implementation Team should meet on a quarterly basis to assess the Plan's progress and refocus priorities. The Strategy Chart should be used as an evaluation tool, including adding new projects as they arise while also highlighting completed ones.
- Annual workshops should be held with the key stakeholders to share the progress of the Plan, including successful projects.

STRATEGY CHART

Projects and Initiatives

The attached "Strategy Chart" summarizes all of the projects and recommendations of the Plan. The chart is intended to be used as a benchmarking and ongoing evaluation tool. Each recommendation that is presented in brief on the Strategy Chart is supported in the Union Street Area Plan.

Strategies and Goals

The Strategy Chart outlines the four core strategies and implementation goals. Each of these strategies is linked with one another, but inability to achieve one does not negate the ability to accomplish others.

Responsibilities

The Strategy Chart presents suggestions for the partner organizations that will be responsible for leading the implementation of the Plan. During the initial meeting with implementation partners, individual responsibilities should be assigned to a lead agency. While an agency may be assigned the lead role for implementation, each of these projects should be pursued through partnerships. As the plan progresses, these responsibilities should be reevaluated to determine where roles should change or shift.

Time Frames

The tasks are divided into three time frames; "Short-Term" 2011-2012, "Medium-Term" 2013-2015 and "Long-Term" 2016-2020. The first series are initial demonstration projects that should begin immediately. These are simple projects that will be highly visible, have significant impact, and should be completed within the first two years after the Plan is adopted. The second series are more involved projects and continuations of initial demonstration projects. These "Medium-Term" projects should be completed within the following three years. The final series of projects are "Long-Term" or plan-completion projects, many of which will not be completed until after 2020. Over time this category will continue to fill as priorities evolve.

The Strategy Chart and its recommendations represent a living document. As time goes by and implementation proceeds, some priorities will shift while others will arise. The implementation section of the Strategy Chart should be evaluated at least annually. This evaluation process will allow for finished tasks to be indicated on the chart, for responsibilities to be shifted between parties, and for time frames to be adjusted for individual projects.

Union Street Area Plan Strategy Chart

The strategies below represent urban design and development projects to enhance Aiken's Union Street Area. The tasks are presented in four key strategic areas, and are accompanied by short, medium, and long-term tasks to meet the larger goal.

Strategies	Short -Term: 2012-2013	Medium -Term: 2014-2015	Long -Term: 2016-2020	Goal
Land Use & Urban Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Coordinate with Department of Transportation for development of the Southeastern Gateway and other treatments.▶ Develop incentives for façade and building renovations.▶ Pursue National Register designation for Union St area.▶ Begin park maintenance improvements including organization elements like pedestrian walks and relocation of the railroad caboose.▶ Continue efforts to obtain r/w and park property from the railroad.▶ Develop schematic concepts for intersection treatment and crosswalks, making the study area more pedestrian friendly.▶ Rezone the General Business portion of the study area to Downtown Business.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Develop funding opportunities for gateway, streetscape improvements and Gyles Park re-development.▶ Prepare landscape/streetscape plan for the gateway.▶ Assist property owners to seek out rehabilitation tax credits and other building renovations incentives.▶ Work with Department of Transportation and Public Works to install decorative safe crosswalks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Complete improvement projects for gateway, streetscape elements and Gyles Park.	<p>The Union Street Area will become a unique area and anchor to downtown. It will incorporate active and passive gathering places, private sector investment, institutional expansion, and new living spaces.</p>
Character	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Recruit active retailers and restaurants to the Union Street Area.▶ Encourage outdoor dining and display of merchandise.▶ Encourage creative signage, colors, and displays.▶ Encourage continued use of the parkways for informal music sessions and activities.▶ Conduct cleanup and beautification efforts including private properties, vacant parcels, the park, the parkways, and the railroad corridor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Create distinct banner system for study area.▶ Begin programming regular events in Gyles Park and throughout the area.▶ Use Gyles Park as satellite site for Newberry St events.▶ Create opportunities for public art.▶ Expand railroad heritage presence with interpretive exhibits at the City of Aiken's Visitor Center and Train Museum and potentially Gyles Park.▶ Develop incentives to encourage owners to make façade improvements.▶ Assist property owners in the design review process to achieve the desired Union Street study area character.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Create comprehensive wayfinding system.	<p>With the City of Aiken's Visitor Center and Train Museum at its heart, the Union Street Area will become an active space for residents and destination for visitors. The area will be dynamic and lively, characterized by entertainment options, reasonably priced residential, and uses that enliven the district.</p>
Catalyst Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Present the Plan vision to owners of property regarding three potential catalyst projects to determine interest & buy-in.<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Gyles Park Multi-Family/Mixed Use Development- Union Street Mixed Use Development- Infrastructure (Parking, Roundabout, Streetscape)▶ Engage St. Mary's building committee to determine potential partnership/plan that will accommodate church programming and private sector development.▶ Market feasibility study for Multi-family GPMF.▶ Create preservation plan for area buildings deemed worthy of preservation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Create plan brochure to market to developers.▶ Issue request for development proposals with criteria, for Gyles Park Multi-Family/Mixed Use Development & Union Street Mixed Use Development projects.▶ City acquires property for interior parking lots.▶ Pursue preservation tax credits/grants for historic structures▶ Develop Heritage Walk as interpretive system throughout and beyond Union Street Area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Private sector development for Gyles Park Multi-Family/Mixed Use Development & Union Street Mixed Use Development projects begins construction.▶ City develops interior parking for Gyles Park Multi-Family/Mixed Use Development & Union Street Mixed Use Development projects.	<p>The development of the Union Street area will be driven by key catalyst projects that will serve to anchor the study area. These developments will balance public uses, private investment, and institutional expansion.</p>
Implementation Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ City Council adopts Union Street Area Plan and concept as policy guide.▶ Plan is presented to implementation partners for buy-in and to assign participation.▶ Form Implementation Team to guide Plan.▶ Assign specific tasks to individual agencies, including lead agencies for general strategies.▶ Pursue various funding streams for public improvements▶ Insert priority project into Capital Improvement Program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Create Marketing strategy for business recruitment.▶ Consider Tax Increment Financing district when area is ready to develop.▶ Conduct market analysis for downtown Aiken.▶ Host regular progress workshops with implementation partners.▶ Continue ongoing plan evaluation and prioritization of strategy chart.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Consider additional funding sources such as continued capital projects monies.▶ Continue ongoing plan evaluation and prioritization of strategy chart.	<p>Relying on strong partnerships, the City and other stakeholder organizations will work together to accomplish the goals and tasks identified in the plan.</p>